

VZCZCXRO2844
PP RUEHAG RUEHROV
DE RUEHCV #0213/01 0511936
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 201936Z FEB 08
FM AMEMBASSY CARACAS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0631
INFO RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHWH/WESTERN HEMISPHERIC AFFAIRS DIPL POSTS PRIORITY
RUMIAAA/HQ USSOUTHCOM MIAMI FL PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 000213

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

HQSOUTHCOM ALSO FOR POLAD
DEPARTMENT PASS TO AID/OTI (RPORTER)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/19/2023
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PTER](#) [ENGR](#) [CO](#) [VE](#)
SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S MEETING WITH PODEMOS LEADERS - FEB 19

CARACAS 00000213 001.2 OF 002

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT RICHARD DOWNES,
REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

11. (C) Summary. Podemos leaders told the Ambassador February 19 that their break with President Chavez is permanent. They now believe Chavez has abandoned principle in favor of perpetuating himself in power. They hope to make political gains by focusing on pressing national issues and capitalizing on growing discontent among Chavez supporters. They also said Chavez' confrontation with the United States is a key element of his electoral strategy, and they urged USG officials to eschew responding publicly to Chavez' provocations. Aragua State Governor Bolivar asserted that Chavez is seeking an alliance with the FARC because he cannot rely on his own military reserve. Bolivar reviewed his efforts to make the internet available in the barrios of Aragua and expressed concern that the government may try to restrict internet access in the future. While reduced in numbers, Podemos remains an important and credible left-wing opposition voice in Venezuelan politics. End Summary.

12. (C) The Ambassador hosted a February 19 breakfast for Aragua State Governor Didalco Bolivar, National Assembly (NA) Deputies Ricardo Gutierrez and Juan Jose Molina, and legislative aide Antonio Ochoa, all of Podemos. DCM, PolCouns, and Deputy PolCouns accompanied. Podemos Secretary General Ismael Garcia did not attend, but Bolivar was authorized to speak on his behalf. Bolivar noted that Podemos has had periodic contact with Embassy officials in the past, and would like to maintain such ties. The Ambassador stressed his interest in engaging with political parties across Venezuela's political spectrum.

Attacking Chavez from the Left

13. (C) The Podemos leaders stressed that they believe Chavez and his close military supporters are pursuing "permanence in power" rather than advancing a viable and principled socioeconomic agenda. Brandishing a blue-covered copy of Venezuela's constitution, Bolivar said Podemos could support efforts to implement the 1999 Constitution, but remains firmly opposed to efforts to introduce a new "red, very red" Constitution. They lamented Chavez' strong-arm efforts to forge a "single revolutionary party" (PSUV). They added that they do not anticipate either reconciliation with Chavez or open identification with traditional opposition parties.

14. (C) The Podemos leaders conceded that Chavez and his United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) have succeeded in depleting Podemos' numbers. They noted that most Podemos National Assembly members, mayors, and government employees left Podemos for PSUV in the wake of stiff government pressure. The NA leadership excluded Podemos members from important committee assignments in January. Nevertheless, the Podemos leaders insisted that there is growing discontent within Chavismo. The party hopes to attract new members by focusing on pressing national issues, principally crime, food shortages, and poverty eradication.

15. (C) Bolivar speculated that Chavez may try to delay state and/or municipal elections until next year if he thinks his movement will lose a significant number of gubernatorial and municipal races. He also accused Chavez of undermining the democratic process by trying to secure judicial exclusions against important opposition candidates, such as Chacao Mayor Leopoldo Lopez, an otherwise strong candidate for the Caracas mayorship. Podemos will continue to provide democratic opposition to Chavez within the National Assembly and at the polls. Ricardo Gutierrez, for example, is considering running for the governorship of Portuguesa, a traditional Chavista stronghold.

"Don't Give Chavez Ammunition"

16. (C) Bolivar stressed that Chavez has made anti-Americanism a central plank of his electoral campaigns, and he recommended that the USG avoid responding publicly to Chavez' provocations whenever possible. Strategic silence, continued Bolivar, undermines Chavez' efforts to persuade Venezuelans that the USG is an external threat. He also acknowledged that the USG has a responsibility to defend its interests and principles

CARACAS 00000213 002.2 OF 002

17. (C) The Podemos leaders raised the ExxonMobil commercial dispute as an example of an issue in which Chavez seeks to exploit nationalist sentiment. Bolivar and Gutierrez said Podemos understands that ExxonMobil has a right to seek international arbitration, although they believe ICSID and foreign courts may be somewhat biased against Venezuelan state oil company PDVSA. They also said they understand that the USG has a responsibility to defend U.S. companies. The Ambassador noted that USG officials supported ExxonMobil's right to international arbitration to obtain just compensation and have made clear that the United States is not a party to the dispute. The latter point has sometimes been buried in local daily reporting.

Colombia

18. (C) Bolivar asserted that Chavez seeks an alliance with the FARC because he knows that his efforts to build an effective military reserve force have failed. Bolivar shared that during a U.S. naval visit to Curacao some years ago, the local Reserve tried to mobilize its members, but only a small percentage of the Reserve actually reported for duty "to defend the revolution." The Aragua State Governor also said Chavez' rhetorical attacks on Colombian President Uribe are costing him politically because of the sizable Colombian-Venezuelan population that is able to vote in Venezuela.

Free Access to Internet

19. (C) Bolivar noted that he recently visited the United Nations in New York to submit a proposal to add the right to

unrestricted internet access to the U.N. Declaration of Human Rights. He expressed concern that the BRV is removing internet portals from Bolivarian schools and may eventually seek to restrict the Venezuelan population's access to the internet, using similar means employed by the Iranian and Cuban governments. The Aragua State governor reviewed his efforts to provide wi-fi internet access to residents of low-income neighborhoods and his plans to open a "John F. Kennedy information center" with free internet access later this spring.

Comment

110. (C) Podemos, while reduced in numbers over the last year, is trying to carve out non-Chavista left-wing space in Venezuela's highly polarized political environment. Despite Chavez' attacks, the party continues to exercise influence disproportionate to its diminished size. As former loyal allies of Chavez, Podemos criticism of BRV policies is potentially more damaging to Chavismo than criticism from traditional opposition parties. Podemos' opposition to Chavez' proposed constitutional reforms, for example, was an important factor in the "No" victory in the December 2007 constitutional referendum. Moreover, Podemos is currently the only dissident party within the National Assembly in the wake of the opposition's boycott of the 2005 parliamentary elections. Podemos is also poised to try to attract PSUV dissidents.

DUDDY